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ABSTRACT

Case study is a method currently being used in the field of English in which the investigator gathers data from several sources on an individual: directly from the individual, from the individual's parents, from school records, and from the individual's teachers. The investigator interviews and observes the individual over a period of time in order to learn something about the individual. This paper defines case study, describes the theoretical and practical advantages of case study, discusses how to gather data for a case study, examines problems encountered with case studies, offers several research questions for possible investigation, and discusses writing the report of the case study. It is concluded that case study is a basic, viable method of research which can also improve the investigator's skills of observing and listening. (TS)

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Using Case Studies to Explore Causes of Failure to Learn to Write

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Introduction

Case study is a method currently being used in the field of English in which the investigator gathers data from several sources on an individual--from the individual himself, his parents, his school records and his teachers. The investigator interviews and observes the individual over a period of time in order to learn something about him, for example, his reading or writing abilities.

As described by Hedda Bolgar (1965, p. 28), case study is exploratory in nature: Although the investigator has certain questions that he would like to answer, his mind is open to new concerns that may generate from his endeavors; he knows that he may be only beginning to clear a path for better understanding of the area under investigation. In addition, the approach focuses on the individual, aims primarily at discovering and generating hypotheses, and relies on careful recorded observation.

Opponents of case study methodology argue that it is unscientific and observer biased (Campbell & Stanley, 1972, p. 6) and that the method encourages the investigator to become too attached to his sample and to be too subjective in the gathering and interpretation of his data. However, Diesing (1971, p. 280) points out that objectivity and detachment -- both means of reducing observer bias--emasculate the method:

> ...observation depends essentially on the creative use of bias to discover things that would otherwise not be observable, so the minimizing of bias and involvement would destroy the method. An observer who is not emotionally involved will be unable to empathize, to see things from the perspective of

> his subject, and therefore will miss much of the meaning of what he sees. Consequently, he will not know how to ask the right questions...and look in the right places. (1971, p. 280).

In borrowing the techniques of observation frequently used in the fields of social science and clinical psychology, investigators in the field of English have the tools to observe over extended periods of time and document how students do or do not mature as writers, publishing the findings in language not heavily psychometric but simple and descriptive. My feelings were much the same as Shaughnessy's (1973, p. 403). Case study was both the language and the method my study needed to describe not only what students did when they wrote, but also what school writing programs and instruction had possibly done to them.

Advantages of Case Study

Practical advantages of the method in terms of equipment and interview procedure are the following: (1) You need no elaborate training in psychometrics. As teachers we always observe our students' behavior in the classroom and make mental notes about the strategies we will use the next time to elicit optimum response from our students. Though observation is an intrinsic activity of the field you can do it more systematically for observing writing behavior by using Stallard's checklist or devising one of your own, (2) the tape recorder and stop watch are relatively inexpensive, accessible items which facilitate systematic record keeping and accurate data collection. For example, students' oral comments which the investigator may fail to write down are captured on the tape recorder for later analysis, possibly through several replays which recreate aural/oral aspects of the

interview. In addition, the stop watch measures the duration of timed writing with accuracy, (3) interviews can be completed in a relatively short period of time. You take only the amount of time and number of interviews you need to answer your questions; the length of time of your study is flexible, and (4) interviews can take place in formal and informal settings--the former being places like school, the latter, the student's home or your own.

However, do not be duped by the superficial flexibility of case study methodology. Come prepared to the interview sessions or you will probably waste valuable time groping for something to say or for some writing activity for your subjects to do.

Prepare in advance the topics for assigned writing, the interview sessions that will be reserved for unassigned topics, and the questions you will ask during the interviews. During the interviews, take notes (especially after them when you should write down impressions and ideas that come to you), and time silent and composed aloud writing episodes with a stop watch. These procedures contribute to efficient management of your study.

Another precaution about case study is this--avoid being too structured and fixed in your plans. Too much structure and no allowance for spontaneity can be detrimental, causing you to overlook or ignore important developments in your study. To illustrate this, let me give you an example from my own study. During the session, I had planned a specific writing activity for two students. However, the two students, being from the same school, began to discuss and describe their principal instead of doing the preplanned activity. I did not stop the conversation and consequently benefited in several ways: First, I learned something about the principal--how he supervised the school and how students perceived him; second, and more important, I learned how well students could write down what they had just orally related to me, how students

made choices in diction (i.e., which details and words did they include and exclude). I discovered a surprising reason for the disparity between their spoken accounts which were elaborate and colorful and their written accounts which were less so. In writing students avoided words like plastic (shoes), ashy (face), bald (spot), and pinstripe (suit) because they could not spell them. Because I permitted the spontaneous conversation to occur, a relevant and revealling writing activity grew out of it. Had I been overly structured--too unwilling to stray from my plans -- I probably would have missed this finding about the student's oral and written language.

Though you must maintain a sense of direction for each interview, strike a balance between structure and flexibility.

Question I Explored

I explored the following questions:

1. What is the composing process and writing behaviors of the poor writer?
2. What are the characteristics and language features of the poor writer's written pieces?
3. What role do schools and teachers play in writing failure?

Having selected six black students who were identified as poor writers from grade levels seven, ten, and college, I began my investigation with four objectives. The first was to ascertain if findings about language problems of disadvantaged students were true for my sample. One finding was that the disadvantaged black student who speaks a non - standard dialect often has problems with writing because the black culture relies on an oral, not a written tradition in which to communicate. The second objective was to compare their composing processes and writing behaviors to those of good writers, studies of which have been done by Emig (1971), and Stallard (1972).

They reported that good writers stop frequently to reread what they have written, change many words as they write, spend more time in writing than writers in general, and average 343 words in pieces of prose. The next objective was to examine ineffective, disadvantaged writers at three grade levels for similarities and differences and the last, to investigate the role of schools in writing failure.

How to Gather Data

To answer my research questions I needed data from three different sources - (1) interviews with teachers, students, and parents, (2) the students' writing products, and (3) published statements about writing instruction in the schools. For teachers, I wanted to know what kind of writing instruction occurred in their classes and at their schools; for students, their past writing experience instruction, and present composing process and writing behaviors; for parents, their experiences with and opinions of writing. Sample questions I asked teachers were "How far in advance do you assign an essay?", "How much time do you allow them to write?", "Do your students select their topics?", "Do they select topics from a list or make up their own topic?", "Do your students write at home, in the classroom, or both?", "What kinds of things do you look for in student compositions as signs of improvement?" Sample questions I asked parents were "What kind of writing did you do in school?" "When do you take a pen/pencil in hand?" "When do your write?" "Do you value writing? Is it important to you?", "Do you read your child's writing? Does your child read to you what he has written?" "What comments do you make after reading/hearing the compostion?" I had used these questions in a pilot study to see if people understood them.

As I stated previously, interviews were not the only method I used to collect data. I had students write and I plan to analyze these products using an instrument I developed. I had them compose aloud in order to ascertain rate, behaviors, and syntactical/lexical choices that they made. Because I wanted to know something about writing instruction in the schools, I read curriculum guides, a report of the teaching of English in New York State, and articles about writing failure in local and national newspapers -- all published statements about writing instruction.

Problems Encountered with the Study

Although the data has been collected, I did have problems with the initial execution and management of the study, involving to some extent school administrators, the sample, and the interview questions. For example, the assistant superintendent of schools refused to permit me either to observe classes or to examine student's records, a predicament that resulted in a revised sample selection and teacher interview procedure for my study.

Once I had the study underway, I encountered problems with the students. Some of the problems were (1) tardiness and poor attendance. They did not contact me in advance when they knew that they would be late or absent for an appointment and consequently, I waited away many hours; (2) failure to do writing assignments at home with excuses of "I lost it", "I didn't do it", "I didn't understand what I was supposed to do". This situation resulted in my having alternative writing assignments planned because many times homework assignments were crucial to the session since they were to be discussed or revised; (3) collaboration with relatives on homework assignments. On two occasions students admitted, "My sister (or brother)

helped me with this part", in which case the writing product was not a true indication of the subject's own ability; (4) refusal to write during the interview on a topic either she or I selected. When one student would not write, I was almost at a loss of what to do since I could force her to do nothing. Thus, we simply discussed why she did not want to write that day and before the session ended, she had changed her mind and decided to write.

Another problem I experienced was with asking questions students would understand. Because students did not know what I meant when I asked them "Did you prewrite, or plan?" or "What impressions do you have of your third grade teacher?" (usually indicating failure to understand with silence or a frown), I had to use simpler vocabulary, especially for the younger students. As a result, I broke down the concept of prewriting to "Did you have any ideas before you began to write?" "How did they come to you?"; to get at planning I asked, "Why did you put these sentences/details in this order?" "How did you decide what sentence to write next?"; to get at impression I asked, "What memories or pictures do you have in your mind about your third grade teacher?", "What stands out in your mind about English teachers you have had?"

Consequently, I had to adjust my language and vocabulary to the audience -- an audience not only younger but also less experienced with the jargon of the composing process than I. While I could discuss dimensions of the composing process with my advisor and be understood, I could not with my sample who was unfamiliar with the terminology and the concepts.

Research Questions for Possible Investigations

My questions involved writing failure, a phenomenon occurring at various grade levels. Other areas that might be investigated are the

following:

1. What causes writing apprehension and anxiety? In Research in the Teaching of English (1975), Daly and Miller present a reliable likert type instrument composed of twenty-six items; the instrument yields a score indicating the individual's writing apprehension level. The investigator could identify several students with high anxiety levels and, using case study, note their past and present writing experiences.
2. What is the composing process of English teachers? The investigator could select three English teachers to ascertain how they plan, start, write, stop, and reformulate during the writing process.

Writing the Report

Whatever issues you chose to examine through case study methodology, organize and report the findings well. Since there is no outline specifically for case study, you might check several sources for example one by Allen (1974, p. 71). You might also use the format for tables included in this paper, gleaned from other sources as well as my dissertation.

Many references show that there is a pattern to the organization of the research report for academic research. No one approach is better than any other, but the pattern is to present the statement of purpose in the early part of the paper, conduct the analysis and interpretation in the middle section, and present a summary and conclusions as the final part of the paper.

Review the table of contents of dissertations and theses similar to

your topic that have been approved at your school. They may provide you with a method for organizing your own thoughts.

Writing Failure: Exploratory Case Studies at Grade Seven, Grade Ten, and College Level. Elizabeth Metzger. State University of New York at Buffalo, in progress.

Table 1

Silent Writing

MODE	College		Ten		Seven	
	Sandra	David	Gwen	Helen	Michael	Diane
Autobiography	Total Words Total Time Words/min.					
Exposition						
Poetry						
Socratic Dialogue						

Note: Observe similiarities and differences among students by grade level and/or writing mode.

An Analysis of the Writing Behavior of Good Writers. Charles Stallard. University of Virginia, 1972.

Table 2

OBSERVATION CHECKLIST

Student_____

Time the assignment was received_____

Time the physical act of writing began_____

Time physical act of writing ended_____

Pre-writing?

1. Does the writer make an outline?_____
2. Does he engage in random activity?_____
3. Does he talk with peers?_____
4. Does he ask questions?_____

Writing:

1. Does he make corrections as he writes?_____
2. Does he stop writing at intervals?_____
3. Does he read what he has written before finishing the paper?_____
4. Note the time each reading behavior occurred, indicating whether all or a segment of the paper was read.
5. If he reads all or segments of his work as he writes does he make changes as he does so?_____
6. Does he rewrite the first draft?_____
7. Does he change punctuation during revision?_____
8. Does he have difficulty concentrating on the task?_____
9. Does he use a dictionary?_____
10. Does he use other reference books?_____

Hesitation Patterns:

Keep a record of the time each pause, stop, or any type of hesitation in the physical act of putting words on paper occurs. Note the time the hesitation started and stopped to the nearest second.

Conclusion

Case study improved my skills of observing and listening. Because I studied a small group intensively over a period of time, I saw differences in the abilities of students at the same grade level and heard patterns of composing start to emerge across grade levels.

I learned a great deal about the students -- their backgrounds, families, and friends -- because though our discussions were sometimes tangential they were also informative. Each of my students was an individual with a personality I wanted to understand and a composing process I wanted to describe, not an anonymous participant in a large control or experimental group. They grew to trust me and were frank with me because we worked together on a one to one basis; I was not only the lady with the tape recorder but also a friend who they telephoned and visited.

If your questions are exploratory, as mine were, you might consider using case study methodology. For me, it has proved to be not only a basic, viable method of research, but also a rewarding one.

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